



Community Impact Assessment

A Quick Reference for Transportation



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Purpose

This guide was written as a quick primer for transportation professionals and analysts who assess the impacts of proposed transportation actions on communities. It outlines the community impact assessment process, highlights critical areas that must be examined, identifies basic tools and information sources, and stimulates the thought-process related to individual projects.

In the past, the consequences of transportation investments on communities have often been ignored or introduced near the end of a planning process, reducing them to reactive considerations at best. The goals of this primer are to increase awareness of the effects of transportation actions on the human environment and emphasize that community impacts deserve serious attention in project planning and development—attention comparable to that given the natural environment. Finally, this guide is intended to provide some tips for facilitating public involvement in the decisionmaking process.

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1. Introduction

What is it?

Community Impact Assessment

Community impact assessment is a process to evaluate the effects of a transportation action on a community and its quality of life. The assessment process is an integral part of project planning and development that shapes the outcome of a project. Its information is used continuously to mold the project and provide documentation of the current and anticipated social environment of a geographic area with and without the action. The assessment should include all items of importance to people, such as mobility, safety, employment effects, relocation, isolation, and other community issues.

Why assess community impacts?

Importance

Transportation investments have major influences on society, with significant economic and social consequences. However, in many instances in the past, impacts on people have not received the attention they deserve. The community impact assessment process alerts affected communities and residents, as well as transportation planners and decisionmakers, to the likely consequences of a project, and ensures that human values and concerns receive proper attention during project development. Specifically, community impact assessment is important for:

Quality of Life

A high-quality standard of living for all Americans means we must protect the essential elements of existence, including neighborhoods and community values. The assessment of community impacts supports sustainable, livable communities; promotes community values and thriving neighborhoods; and contributes to general well-being.

**Responsive
Decision-
making**

The assessment of community impacts helps ensure that transportation policies and investments embrace the concerns of neighborhoods, communities, and society as a whole. Understanding the relationship between transportation actions and community life leads to conflict minimization and the resolution of potential problems. Active involvement of affected parties leads to better decisions and greater acceptance of projects, while creating a sense of community ownership and enhancing agency credibility.

Coordination

Community impact assessment helps coordinate and integrate independent plans for land use, economics, and transportation to achieve common goals. This process helps communities meet State and local regulations and policies, such as zoning ordinances, environmental quality regulations, growth management and adequate facilities legislation, and comprehensive planning.

**Nondiscrimi-
nation**

Community impact assessment ensures that we act on our obligation to achieve environmental justice through practices and procedures that do not discriminate. It alerts decisionmakers to the effects on all segments of society and the potential for disproportionately high and adverse effects on specific populations.

Legal Backing

In addition to the practical reasons for community impact assessment, it is legally required and supported by major Federal regulations, statutes, policies, technical advisories, and Executive Orders, including:

Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA)

National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA)

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and related statutes

23 USC 109(h), Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1970

23 CFR 771, Environmental Impact and Related Procedures (1987)

TA 6640.8A (1987), Guidance for Preparing and Processing Environmental and Section 4(f) Documents

Executive Order (EO) 12898 on Environmental Justice (1994) and proposed Department of Transportation Order on Environmental Justice (1996)

Farmland Protection Policy Act (1981), as amended in 1994 (7 CFR 658)

Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act (1970, referred to as the "Uniform Act,") as amended in 1987

FHWA's Environmental Policy Statement (1994)

It is FHWA's policy to:

Seek new partnerships with tribal governments, businesses, transportation and environmental interest groups, resource and regulatory agencies, affected neighborhoods, and the public.

Ensure that those historically underserved by the transportation system, including minority and low-income populations, are included in our outreach.

Actively involve our partners and all affected parties in an open, cooperative, and collaborative process, beginning at the earliest planning stages and continuing through project development, construction, and operation.

FHWA Environmental Policy Statements (1990 & 1994)

Recommendations of the President's Council on Sustainable Development

Analysts should become familiar with these requirements. Furthermore, they should identify and understand the implications of State and local statutes, regulations, and policies which affect community impact assessment.

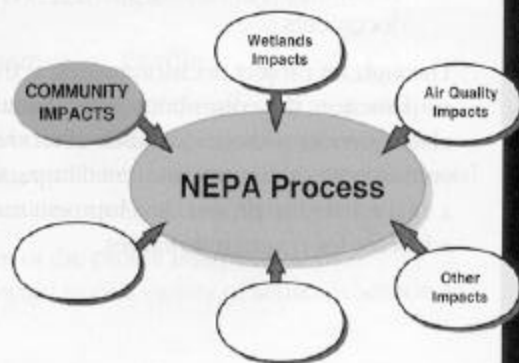
Community

There are many definitions of community. An analyst should consider several definitions, generally based on a geographic or spatial component.

Community is defined in part by behavior patterns which individuals or groups of individuals hold in common. These behavior patterns are expressed through daily social interactions, the use of local facilities, participation in local organizations, and involvement in activities that satisfy the population's economic and social needs. A community is also defined by shared perceptions or attitudes, typically expressed through individuals' identification with, commitment to, and attitude toward a particular identifiable area. In addition, there are other concepts of community which are not based on spatial relationships. Communities may be based on a common characteristic or interest, such as religion, ethnicity, income strata, or concern for the economic viability of a region, which provides a psychological unity among members.

Role

Community impact assessment is integral to the entire project development and decisionmaking process. For example, the assessment of community impacts, along with other relevant environmental impact studies, helps shape project decisions and outcomes under NEPA.



**How is
community
defined?**

**How does
community
Impact
assessment fit
into project
development?**

Within the NEPA process, the assessment serves a number of key roles:

- The assessment provides critical information about community values for the formulation of project objectives and the development of alternatives. This activity should start at the beginning of a study process, with community goals and concerns serving as major input to a project's purpose-and-need statement. As project alternatives are developed and subsequently refined or eliminated, there should be continuous informal communication between the project engineers, planners, and the community impact analyst so that options reflect community values to the extent possible.
- In the evaluation and selection of a preferred alternative, information from the community impact assessment should be considered at least equal to other related environmental studies in making sound project decisions. As decisions are made, the analyst should recommend techniques to deal with potential adverse impacts and assure that relevant changes within the community are brought to the team's attention.
- Finally, the assessment influences the NEPA "significant effects" determination on whether a Categorical Exclusion (CE), Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), or Environmental Assessment (EA) is appropriate. It provides needed information for the CE determination, EA, Finding Of No Significant Impact (FONSI), draft EIS, final EIS, and Record Of Decision (ROD), and may be summarized or fully incorporated into these documents.

Throughout project decisionmaking activities and until construction, the community impact analyst assures that consequences to the social fabric of an area are given consideration with other environmental impacts. The analyst plays a vital role in the project development team as a vigorous advocate for community values.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Executive Order 12898 on Environmental Justice apply to Federal activities. Appropriate implementation of Title VI and EO 12898 will be accomplished through implementation of the FHWA NEPA process. This process includes fully identifying social, economic, and environmental effects, considering alternatives, coordinating with agencies, involving the public, and utilizing a systematic interdisciplinary approach. Addressing the issues coupled with full implementation of 23 USC 109(h) (e.g., community cohesion, availability of public facilities and services, adverse employment effects, etc.) will prevent the potential for discrimination or disproportionately high and adverse impacts. Community impact assessment is key to this preventive approach.

The Assessment Process

The assessment of community impacts rarely flows in a fixed, predictable series of steps. However, the analyst must be aware of the basic logic behind the process in performing an assessment. The assessment process diagram (on the following page) depicts the fundamental tasks in the process, and previews the associated sections of this guidebook for reference.

The assessment process incorporates the following components:

Define the Project and Study Area

In coordination with engineers, develop various project alternatives which satisfy the project purpose and need, and identify areas of potential impact (Section 2).

Develop a Community Profile

Determine the characteristics of the affected area, such as neighborhood boundaries, locations of residences and businesses, demographic information, economic data, social history of communities, and land use plans (Section 3).

The development of the profile is supported by information collected from a variety of sources (Section 4).

What is the process?

Analyze Impacts

Examine the impacts to the community of the proposed action versus no action. Identify and investigate the consequences of the transportation action (Section 5).

A number of analysis tools can be used to examine these relationships and estimate impacts (Section 6).

Identify Solutions

Identify and recommend potential solutions to address adverse impacts. Techniques include avoidance, minimization, mitigation, and enhancement (Section 7).

Use Public Involvement

Use public participation as a basis to develop project alternatives, a source of information to develop the community profile, a tool to identify and evaluate impacts, and a method to identify acceptable ways to address impacts. Public involvement is an integral element to all of the above steps (Section 8).

